

BUILDING AUTONOMY AND INDEPENDENCE IN YOUNG LEARNERS

AE TEACHER'S CORNER

Teaching young learners (YLS) can be very enjoyable because they like learning through fun, hands-on activities, games, and songs. Young students can also show a lot of academic growth during a course or school year, and seeing this progress is very rewarding for teachers.



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However, despite the positive aspects, teaching YLS is not easy and certainly comes with its own set of challenges. Young students often need much more explicit instruction in procedures and expectations than older, more independent students. Managing the classroom and keeping young children engaged can also be difficult at times. In addition to teaching academic content, YL educators are tasked with helping their students develop social skills and establish a sense of personal responsibility.

How does a teacher tackle all of these issues? Giving YLS choices and opportunities to contribute their ideas can have very positive effects on behavior, classroom management, students' sense of personal responsibility, and the overall classroom community. In this month's Teacher's Corner, we will share ideas about how educators can develop autonomy and independence in young learners.

Asking Learners to Help Make the Rules

Young Learners are used to being told what to do by teachers, parents, older siblings, caretakers, and lots of other people in their lives. In most classrooms, the teacher gives instructions and students are expected to follow the rules. However, allowing YLS to help set the rules and expectations of their classroom community makes them feel empowered and hold themselves, and each other, accountable.

The best time to start a discussion about classroom rules is at the beginning of a year or term, but this discussion can also take place at any time during a course. Regardless of when the discussion takes place, involving YLs in this process helps them feel that their ideas are important and that the rules are fair.

Begin the discussion by saying, “It is important that we all work together to make our classroom a great place for everyone to learn. Today we are going to talk about how we will take care of ourselves, our classmates, and our classroom so that we can do our best work every day.” Start with three separate pieces of poster paper or chart paper. Label each paper with one topic: *self*, *others*, and *classroom*. Then, ask your learners some guiding questions about classroom behavior in these three areas, such as:



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- If I am a student in this class, how can I show that I am ready to try my best and learn each day? What things will I do? What things will I not do?
- When I talk to other students, what kinds of words should I use? Should I touch someone else or take their things without asking? How can I be a good classmate and friend?
- How can I care for the classroom that we all share? What should I do to keep the classroom clean? How should I take care of our books and materials?

As students share ideas, record the ideas on poster/chart paper, leaving the bottom third of the page blank (this is where rules will be added). Whenever possible, list students’ ideas as positive statements about the behaviors you want to see. For instance, write *Listen and look at the person talking* rather than *Don’t talk or look around the room when someone is talking*.



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After students' ideas are written down, review them by rereading each list out loud. Then, tell students, "I think that we could use this list to make some rules for our classroom. Is there a way that we can put all of these ideas into one or two rules that we all agree on?" Depending on the age of your learners, you may need to give some examples, such as *I will be ready to learn and try my best* or *I will work hard to learn each day*. Once the learners settle on one or two sentences, use a different colored marker to add them at the bottom of each poster in large, legible print. It is best to only have a few simple rules that

are easy for students to remember.

Once the class agrees on rules for self, others, and classroom, display the posters prominently where all students can see them. When addressing problem behaviors, it is very powerful to remind YLs about the class discussion and the fact that the students themselves came up with the rules. Having a list of the behaviors that the class has agreed upon makes it easy to gently remind students of expectations, rather than focusing on what they are doing wrong. The lists are useful for reviewing expectations and procedures with the whole class as needed. This activity can also be repeated for other areas of the school or parts of the daily schedule like the hallway, recess/playground, lunch/cafeteria, etc.

Involving Learners in Classroom Management

Managing a classroom of YLs is extremely challenging, if not impossible, for a teacher to do on his or her own. Enlisting the students themselves to complete simple jobs can not only help the teacher, but can also provide a sense of personal responsibility and ownership for YLs. Below are several suggested classroom jobs for YLs that can be used according to the needs in your classroom.

- **Line Leader:** The first student in line, in charge of stopping in designated places along route and maintaining appropriate speed
- **Door Holder:** Holds any doors for students in line along the travel route
- **Last in Line:** Last person in line, closes or locks doors after Door Holder completes job
- **Monitors:** Watches out for classmates and/or redirects students in the hallways, bathrooms, at the water fountain, during recess, etc.

- **Lighting Director:** Turns lights on/off when entering or leaving a room, or as requested
- **Librarian:** Keeps classroom library organized, assists with checking in and checking out of books as needed
- **Board Cleaner:** Erases and cleans the board as needed/requested
- **Paper Passer:** Passes out papers/assignments
- **Paper Collector:** Collects completed papers/assignments
- **Supply Manager:** Hands out and collects necessary supplies
- **Attendance Taker:** Checks to see which students are absent
- **Computer/Media Helper:** Turns computers/technology on/off daily or as needed
- **Errand Runner:** Delivers items or messages to different parts of the school as needed
- **Homework Checker/Collector:** Checks that students have completed homework and/or collects it daily/as requested
- **Cleanliness Monitor:** Checks around the classroom to be sure that students have cleaned up after activities, the floor is clean, and desks are tidy
- **Plant Waterer/Animal Caretaker:** Waters plants, feeds classroom pets
- **New Student Ambassador:** Helps any students new to the classroom learn rules, procedures, schedule, expectations, etc.
- **Emergency Assistant:** In charge of carrying the class emergency bag (containing attendance list, first aid kit, and any other emergency items) on all outings and during fire/emergency drills
- **Substitute(s):** Completes the job of any student who is absent that day

In order to give students a chance to hold jobs they will enjoy, you can spend time explaining all of the roles at the beginning of your class. Then, ask each student to list at least five jobs he or she is interested in doing. You can also assign multiple students to work together in the same role. For larger classes, not every student may be able to hold a job all the time. Try to split up the roles and time so that all students have a chance to do a classroom job at some point in the year.



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Jobs can be changed as often as you'd like, but students should have enough time to learn their responsibilities and become comfortable in their roles. Many teachers change student jobs according to the length of a grading period or term (quarter, trimester, semester, etc.). Each time you change jobs, go back to the students' lists and try to assign each learner a job from his or her interests.

Allowing Learners to Choose Assignments

As teachers, we usually assign our students tasks, homework, and projects to complete and expect them to follow instructions and turn in their work. However, giving YLs options helps them take responsibility for their performance and feel invested in their work. When given a chance, students often choose assignments that they find interesting, that they feel are important, and that they care about. Choices can promote motivated learning, positive attitudes, and accountability. Below are some different assignment options that could be offered as ways for YLs to demonstrate understanding and learning.

- Make a poster that teaches someone else about what you have learned and share it through a presentation or gallery walk.
- Write a paragraph/essay to explain a process, compare and contrast two concepts, or describe an event.
- Complete a graphic organizer with the most important information about the topic.
- Write and perform a skit, or create a video, with a small group of classmates.
- Work with a partner to write a script for an interview with an important character from the book/story, or an expert on the topic you have been learning about. Conduct the interview in front of the class.
- Create an art project (drawing, collage, model, etc.) that illustrates what you have learned and present it to the class or display it in a gallery walk.
- Write a journal entry or create a video diary as if you were a character from the story/book.
- Create a quiz that asks about the most important things you think someone should know or remember after learning about this topic. Make an answer key for the quiz.
- Match descriptions with words or pictures, or categorize characteristics or details according to topics or ideas you have learned about.



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When it comes to giving learners options, teachers can start small. Students do not have to have a full list of choices for all of their work. Begin by thinking of a few different options for large assignments at the end of a unit or for important projects. For instance, as a summative project after reading a book, offer students the choice of making and presenting a poster about a character, conducting an interview with a character, or writing a journal entry from a character's perspective. It would also be helpful to create examples of the work to give students information about what the assignments include. As you become comfortable offering different options for these types of tasks, you may

think of ways to incorporate choice into daily assignments as well.

Grading different types of assignments may seem confusing, but aligning the tasks with your curriculum standards and objectives will make it clear what you expect students to be able to do in order to demonstrate mastery of the content. For more tips on how to do this, take a look at the Teacher's Corner called [Backward Design and Alignment of Assessments](#) or the American English Webinar [Lesson Planning 101: Mapping Activities for a Clear Path to Learning](#).

Learners feel like an important part of the classroom community when they have a chance to share ideas and make choices. By involving learners in rule-making and daily classroom management tasks, teachers build trust and positive relationships with students. YLs develop a sense of personal responsibility and independence through classroom jobs and assignment choices. By incorporating these ideas in the classroom, teachers can promote engagement and have a positive impact on the academic and social development of young learners.

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Please answer all three questions completely. You will not be accepted into the group unless you answer the questions.

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